

Have you ever really wanted a present for Christmas, pleaded, begged for it and then waited expectantly until Christmas Day? This happened to me the Christmas when I was 14. One of my best friends, Ann, had gotten 2 horses the year before & they had rented pasture space on the edge of town. Now I wasn't really a horse rider, but whenever Ann invited me to go with her I gladly went riding. So that Christmas, I asked Mom & Dad for a pony. An unrealistic request to be sure, as we were very middle class & money for a horse was not in my parents' budget. But I thought I really needed a horse. Christmas Eve we opened a few presents, but the ones from Santa were always opened on Christmas morning. I hoped, against hope, that when I woke up there would be a pony grazing on the grass in our backyard. I remember being VERY disappointed when no horse was munching when I awoke early. I didn't cry but I was close. When I ran downstairs there was a perfectly adequate blue Schwinn bicycle. For years, whenever I rode the Schwinn I thought about the pony that didn't come. But the bike held me in perfectly good stead & I love riding bikes to this day.

It may seem inappropriate to talk about broken dreams and disappointments this close to Christmas. After all, this is the season to be jolly. But it's not jolly for everybody, is it? For those who have lost loved ones this is the loneliest time of the year. And in a world that glorifies materialism, those who are struggling financially may find it to be most disappointing.

Our friend John the Baptist knew about disappointment. John is in prison now and he's looking for a sign " a sign that the long-awaited Messiah has really arrived. That's ironic, don't you think? John the Baptist is the one who first proclaimed Jesus' coming. But much has happened to John since we last saw him preaching and baptizing people in the wilderness, and now his heart is cast down. You'll remember John's message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This message burned in John's soul. John wasn't afraid to proclaim his message to religious leaders and royalty alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to King Herod himself. That was why he was in jail.

This was not the King Herod who was the ruler at the time of the birth of Jesus; this was his son, Herod Antipas, who turned out to be worse than his father. Herod Antipas seduced and later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother. The nation was in shock. John the Baptist condemned King Herod's behavior and was placed in prison. While in prison John realized that his career as a prophet would soon be ended. His life would be over as well.

There was one thing that John wanted to know before he died. John wanted to know beyond a shadow of a doubt if Jesus was really the Messiah. Can you blame him? He had given everything he had " including, in a matter of days, his very life. He wanted to know, has it all been in vain? Is it all an illusion - a dream? In the wilderness John had believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, but in the face of certain death he has some doubts. He wanted to know for sure. So he sent some of his followers to find Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

You see, John the Baptist found himself in a disappointing and disheartening predicament. Things were not working out like he had expected. Sometimes that happens. Disappointment. It was December for John the Baptist. He was hurting in Herod's prison. He was hurting physically and he was hurting emotionally. He was gripped with disappointment.

John Was Disappointed, First of all, Because He Had Different Expectations of What a Messiah Would Do. He was a product of his time. He expected the same kind of Messiah everyone else expected " one who would drive out the despised Romans and establish the kingdom of God. While languishing in prison John must have wondered why more wasn't happening. What's he waiting for? He must have thought to himself time and time again. Why doesn't he drive the Roman dogs out? He was disappointed because of his faulty expectations.

Sometimes we are disappointed, not because what we receive is bad, but because we have faulty expectations. There are people in this very room who feel that life has somehow cheated them, but I can guarantee you that if you lost everything you have right now, and then suddenly had it all restored, you would be exceedingly grateful. The problem is not what we have, but our expectations. John the Baptist expected the Messiah to come by storm, but nothing much seemed to be happening. It was not Jesus who was at fault, but John's expectations. That is the first reason he was gripped by disappointment.

The Second Reason John Was Disappointed Was That He Was Looking For All the Wrong Signs. The followers of John the Baptist caught up with Jesus. They asked Jesus John's question, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." The day of the Lord had arrived. There was evidence that God's kingdom had begun. "Just look around," Jesus told John's followers, "to see what is happening."

Centuries before, there was a prophet named Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied about what would take place when the Messiah would arrive. Isaiah said, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer." Those weren't the signs John was looking for. He was looking for something more dramatic. He was looking for thunder and lightning.

Charles Kuralt, in his travels across the United States, found what looked like a Christmas tree growing in the most unlikely place in the Rockies. "Trees need good soil and good weather and up here there's no soil and terrible weather," Kuralt notes. "Nothing can live up here and certainly not trees. That's why the tree is a kind of miracle."

On a barren stretch of U.S. 50, without another tree in sight, grows this Juniper tree. "Nobody remembers who put the first Christmas ornament on it " some whimsical motorist of years ago. From that day to this, the tree has been redecorated each year. Nobody knows who does it. But each year by Christmas Day, the tree has become a Christmas tree.

"The tree, which has no business growing here at all, has survived against all the odds." People who live miles away in all directions know and love the tree. "Just looking at it makes you think about how unexpected life on earth can be. The tree is so lonely and so brave that it seems to offer courage to those who pass it " and a message. It is the Christmas message: that there is life and hope even in a rough world." (3) Isaiah wrote, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom."

But see, those aren't the kinds of signs that impress people. We want greatness writ large. That's not God's way. God chooses to work in the little insignificant places of life " like a manger, a carpenter's shop and a cross.

The Third Reason John Was Disappointed Was That He Didn't Give God Time.

John wanted action now! We can understand that in light of his current situation. But God takes God's sweet time. After all, God has been working on this world for hundreds of millions of years. But His purpose is just as sure and His plan is just as unstoppable. I've been there, haven't you? God doesn't work according to our time schedule, but according to His. And sometimes He doesn't appear to be working at all. But He is. He is. Certainly, he wasn't working according to John the Baptist's timetable. But he was working. The fact that we celebrate the life of John the Baptist two thousand years later is proof that he was working. How about you? Is your life filled with disappointments because you have unrealistic expectations? Are you looking in all the wrong places to find your happiness? Have you learned to wait upon the Lord?

A Christmas story to end my homily.... The Sunday School teacher carefully lined up four little "cherubs" for the annual Christmas program. Each carried a huge cut out letter. As they stood side by side the letters would spell "star." A slight mixup occurred and those present in the church nearly fell out of their pews as the four little performers took their places " in reverse. They spelled out "rats," not star. That's what happens when you get your priorities out of order.

Bethlehem teaches us about expectations, about signs, and about patience. God begins with a simple babe and humble surroundings and He works slowly, surely. But He is at work. Let us not lose hope. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.